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RELATIONSHIPS AND BLUE DISTRACTIONS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Art

by
Denise Elizabeth Ayers
December 2019

Accepted by:
Kathleen Thum, Committee Chair
Beth Lauritis
Anderson Wrangle

ABSTRACT

This body of work was created in response to observing moments when people in my life succumb to technological distractions during face to face exchanges. My series of drawn portraits meditate on these disconnections where a smart phone often lurks like an uninvited guest between me and another person. The individual's face and hands are meticulously rendered whereas the atmosphere tends toward abstraction. Naturalistic representation conveys a sense of physical presence and abstraction emphasizes that their mind is elsewhere. Lapses in the connection are tied together through abstraction as a tool to convey this ambiguity. I include fragments of my own thoughts to bridge the gap between our communications. In an effort to link myself to them in our disconnection, I capture their likeness accurately to create a gesture of intimacy. The drawings engage with distraction as a societal norm in the hope that we will become increasingly present in our day-to-day lives, look up, and be engaged.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this body of work and research to my husband, Jesse Ayers, for his love and support over these past two and a half years.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my studio mates, Andrea Garland, Annamarie Williams, and Lori Johnson for the many laughs and for regularly providing a shoulder to cry on. Thank you to my committee, Beth Lauritis, Anderson Wrangle, and especially Kathleen Thum for critiquing my work and encouraging me. This body of work would not have been possible without your guidance.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Drawing is a part of our interrelation of our physical environment, recording in and on it, the presence of a human.” (Dexter, 2005)

Throughout my childhood my Mother taught me to be aware of my surroundings. I recall sitting in my car seat in the back of her car and her pointing out the window and telling me to “look!”; look at the hundreds of birds on the powerlines, the different states on the license plates, and the rich green of the landscape. One day, well into the early stages of my visual art career, she told me “I taught you how to be observant,” and she was right. Her efforts have instilled in me to be observant of the nuances within my surroundings, which has traveled with me into adulthood.

Drawing is about observing, slowing down, and recording my surroundings. These portrait drawings for my MFA Exhibition are about observing, not what is happening outside of a car window, but the people I have in my life and what is consuming the shared contemplative moments with them. In our visually overstimulated, fast-paced society, my hope is that the gallery will serve as a space for the viewer to slow down and contemplate.

In our culture, every moment in daily life is filled with a technological distraction. This distraction disrupts connection, focus, and contemplative thought which ultimately separates people from meaningful moments. When engaging in technology around others there is an abstraction in time and space. The person is never fully present where they

physically are; they are neither fully here nor there, but somewhere in between. Using abstract and representational elements in my drawings, I examine the ambiguous nature of a person's interiority. First, after applying ink and watercolor to the paper's surface, I observe how it dries, and contemplate who the ink shapes and bleeds remind me of, and this determines the person I render in the drawing. I do not have access to a person's inner thoughts, so to bridge our disconnection, I use my thoughts and memories to interpret who might go on the paper's surface.

These portrait drawings present images of people who are a part of my life to bring awareness to the intimacy of a shared moment and the distractions to which so many, including myself, succumb.

CHAPTER 2

THROUGH THE LENS OF PORTRAITURE

These drawings bring a contemporary spin to portraiture by merging historic compositional elements and personal intimacy, juxtaposed with a contemporary context that takes into account new technologies used in daily life. In the drawings *Blue Smoke and Mirrors*, and *Sara Contemplating*, the portrait subjects are positioned in the tradition of historical portraiture; in the center of the picture plane from the waist up, within a shallow depth of space. The face, and its expression, is the most developed, inviting the viewer to get up close, examine its rendering, and become acquainted with my close friends, relatives, and me.

In all the pieces within this body of work, I use my drawing tool to follow the form and planes of the face to capture a likeness of the person. Drawing a friend or family member slows down my observation of them in a moment, and offers me the chance to get closer to them and discover something I had not known before. It creates a different type of intimacy. Contemporary Painter David Hockney says: “The Chinese say you need three things for paintings: the hand, the eye and the heart. Two won’t do... A good eye and heart is not enough, neither is a good hand and eye.” (Howgate, 2006) Using the head, the eye, and the heart is a theory that aligns with the intimacy I understand while drawing the person in my work. My heart is the relationship I share with the person which motivates me to capture their likeness in the drawing as accurately as possible.

Blue Smoke and Mirrors depicts a moment I shared with my husband earlier this summer. He is lounging, smoking a cigar, looking out to the left side of the picture plane. I typically use charcoal to render form, which is a rapid process. For this portrait I used the much slower and more painstaking prismacolor colored pencils. Building layers of color, referencing color theory knowledge, and depicting my husband accurately on the paper's surface took time. The abstracted drying of the ink left topographical lines marking its drying process over the span of a few days. Knowing these choices in medium would take longer in development, mimics my yearning to spend more time with him. This choice in medium is an altered gesture in communicating the commitment and dedication I share with him in our relationship and in turn develops a different type of intimacy.

In most of the drawings I use charcoal for its malleability. It allows me to build up marks quickly and render form with care, developing a history on the paper's surface. The process of measuring, building, erasing, and structuring a person two dimensionally is complicated. When the person starts to emerge and become recognizable, I feel like I have gone on a journey to locate them, and after hours of searching, they arrive.

Portraiture that follows European tradition often highlights the surface and exterior of a person versus their interior. An example would be the painters of royal and wealthy families such as, Velázquez and Bronzino. However, I depict friends and family in varying contemplative states and disconnection. I minimize specific qualities of the person's clothing and represent them in an abstracted and usually unrecognizable

physical location. Juxtaposing the rendered clarity of the person's face and the abstracted atmosphere invites the viewer to consider the person's interiority.

Portraiture creates the illusion of a physical intimacy for the viewer to get close up to the figure. I observe this illusion as a recognizable contemporary reality when surrounded by people who are physically present in my surroundings but not mentally in attendance. In the moment when a distraction occurs, I grapple with and contemplate the mystery of the figure's interiority. I represent their interior thoughts by abstracting the space they're in because in that moment of a distraction, I can only think about their physical proximity to me. Their distraction and where they go to in their mind that ultimately cannot be defined.

CHAPTER 3

ABSTRACTION AND REPRESENTATION

Sara Contemplating is a charcoal rendering of my friend. Sara's face is fully rendered, while her shoulders and chest are only suggested with bold charcoal marks and blurred edges. There are green and red ink bleeds filling the space around Sara that also moves through her. The ink bleeds are an abstraction of Sara's physicality and give the figure a transparency, and this atmospheric abstraction is pulled through her body.

Representation invites the viewer to slow down while observing the figure's rendered face, and abstraction may pull their eyes through the drawing more rapidly. Representation is developed through rigorous control in contrast to less controlled liquid medium that changes while it dries. Lapses in connection are tied together through abstraction to convey this ambiguity. Any representations will ultimately fail in capturing the person's thoughts, so I apply my memories and conversations with charcoal script and ink to bridge our gap of disconnection.

Dad's Distraction is a drawing of my dad sitting at a table, exasperated with his phone. Floating up and below the cutout drawing of my dad are organically shaped, cut out pieces of common shapes of doodles in my sketchbook. Doodles are created absentmindedly without any indication as to how they will manifest in their finality. Doodles often begin and end unexpectedly, similar to how I recognize someone's unexpected use of their smartphone disrupting our shared moment. I am not sure when their distraction will begin or end. My thoughts are physically layered in charcoal script

on top of the shapes going around my dad. Marking the shapes with script links myself to him across the table when conversation is severed and he is somewhere else while distracted with his smart phone.

Contemporary artist Denise Stewart-Sanabria creates life-sized, figurative wood cut out drawings. She places her sculptural drawings in the context of a gallery, letting the gallery itself and its visitors be the atmosphere that surrounds her drawn figures. In *Dad's Distraction*, I use the gallery wall as my picture plane. By doing so, I am able to break away from the defined picture plane of a paper's edge and give the person and my thoughts associated with them a physicality. These physical abstractions invite the viewer to observe the representation of atmosphere three-dimensionally in the context of a physical space.

CHAPTER 4

THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS AND THEIR DEMISE THROUGH DISTRACTIONS

³⁷ Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt. 22:37-40, NIV).

My understanding of the relationships I have in my life comes from my faith and belief rooted in Christianity that I am in a relationship with God through Jesus. My reverential love and relationship with Him, above all things, sets the groundwork for how I understand and love others. Similar to my experiences with prayer, contemplation, and meditating on my surroundings, drawing a person with whom I am close is a reverential and ritualistic connection. I react on what I have experienced within our one-to-one conversations that has developed an awareness of the overwhelming presence of smart phones situated between the person and me.

My observations of phone use mostly occur when there is a lull in conversation or when someone becomes distracted by their phone. Author and MIT sociologist, Sherry Turkle, discusses in an interview that we receive a neurochemical high from the constant stimulation that our phones give us. When we allow ourselves to be bored or to contemplate, our brains are receiving nourishment and refueling (Suttie, 2015). The dichotomy of the literal high our phone gives us and the nourishment our brains receive from contemplation has me questioning what resisting the urge to reach for a smart phone would feel like?

In Away; A deep breath the person's expression is serene. Her eyes are closed and her face is rendered clearly. There is another person separated from her, immersed in the blue atmosphere and on their smart phone. While the main person's eyes are shut, the viewer may observe her taking a deep breath by her protruding neck muscles that flex when inhaling deeply. The difference in the manner of the two people communicates their separation in the shared space. Putting the focus on the main person's breath may communicate to the viewer that she is present in the moment and without distraction.

After having moved away from where I had grown up a few years ago, I have come to terms with understanding the weight of distance and its effect on relationships. Even through the efforts of staying in contact with old friends over social media, text, and phone calls, the strength of the relationship changes. In the self-portrait, *Close, Far, Slow*, I am taking a selfie. The selfie action can be recognized by how I am holding my phone away from, but parallel to, my body while looking down at the screen. Through my efforts in keeping people updated with my life through social media, to maintain a close connection, it seems to have created more of a distance. Our relationship ends up not being the same. A selfie is usually taken to be shared with someone else through social media, but my gesture of clasping my robe shut hides a portion of myself from being shared. Layered around my head is an abstraction produced by the repeated layering of the script "close, far, and slow". These words are layered as a result of my contemplating: the *closeness* I am trying to maintain with others while using my phone; how *far* away others feel using social media; and ultimately *slowing* me down in productivity by using

my phone as a daily dependence. In *Close, Far, Slow* I grapple with my dependence on social media for connection.

While I observe technology and its disruption of face-to-face connections I also observe how it affects a person physiologically. *Blinded by the Light* and *A Cloudy Recollection* refer to my observations of technology taking over all mental capacities of the user. The smaller compositions zoom in on the figure's faces, creating the fish-eye illusion of a lens in comparison to the $\frac{3}{4}$ portrait composition. *Blinded by the Light* is a frontal portrait of a girl whose eyes are obscured by the glow of a screen in her glasses. She focuses so intently on the screen that her mouth falls open. *A Cloudy Recollection*, similar to *Blinded by the Light* is drawn with the figure's head filling the majority of the picture plane. *A Cloudy Recollection* does not have the technological glow radiating on a pair of glasses but the figure's eyes are glazed over. This references the blank, tired expression that transforms a person's face after staring at a screen too long.

A Visual Guide on how to Hold and Interact with your Device is a drawing of multiple hands, making different gestures, layered on top of one another. Like artists throughout history who have drawn studies of hands to master their anatomical structure, I drew these hands to study the appearance of what interacting with a phone looks like. Behind the eleven significantly more rendered hands, there are layers of line drawn hands crawling up the greenish blue atmosphere. Each gesture is different, emphasizing the more common gestures of phone use, like, pointing, grasping, swiping, zooming and double tapping. This satirical drawing invites the viewer to consider how these gestures

of hands mimic the appearance of what the often claw-like nature of holding a phone looks like.

CHAPTER 5

VISUAL RECIPROCITY

“Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visual world. If we can accept that we can see that hill over there, we propose that from that hill we can be seen. The reciprocal nature of vision is more fundamental than that of spoken dialogue” (Berger, 1972).

The idea that vision is more fundamental than spoken dialogue makes me question how drawing can create an exchange between the viewer and the portrait figure. Occasionally there is an exchange of gazes between the viewer and the drawn figure, creating an opportunity for the viewer to be contemplative. Though the origin was a moment I captured in my own encounter, by directing the gaze back to the viewer I am producing a visual reciprocity to create a contemplative moment. Though by no means similar in production Marina Abramovich’s *The Artist Is Present* (2010) informs this work. While sitting across from the viewer/visitor in her piece, Abramovich establishes an undistracted moment in the face-to-face interaction without technology or language. I am recreating the power of eye contact in, *In Conversation with Nini*, *Visitor Observing Viewer*, and *Jessica and Ellie*. In between the drawn figures and the viewer is a table, a sketchbook, and a cat. Considering the overall theme of connection and disconnection in this body of work, even with the reciprocity of eye contact in these pieces there is the presence of an object separating them (Abramovich, 2010).

Visitor Observing Viewer is not only a drawing of my studio mate Anna, it is also a response to my experiences working at an art museum in security. Anna is holding a

sketchbook close to her chest with one hand and writing with the other. Her gaze is focused and is not distracted by the lines and gestures of people behind her. As hinted in the title, *Visitor Observing Viewer*, the figure is the visitor of an art museum, and the viewer is the viewer of my drawing; you.

This drawing may promote the same experience of looking at someone looking at artwork, and flipping it to where the visitor is staring back at the viewer. The figure's focused eye contact, posture, and grip of the sketchbook, creates an uncanny tension while she observes the artwork/viewer. This tension created by her intense focus mimics my experiences of the focus visitors' display while observing artwork.

In contrast when the figure is not engaging in eye contact with the viewer there is a separation. Such as the figure in, *Blinded by the Light* whose eyes are obscured by the reflection of a screen reflected in her glasses. Although it feels as if she is close, there is a disconnect because there is not an engagement in eye contact. Although her eyes are open, she is looking down, severing reciprocity. *Ashan Contemplating* is a portrait of a man whose back is to the viewer. He is not engaging in eye contact with the viewer but looks out the left side of the picture plane. What he is observing is unclear but in the direction of his gaze is the edge of a wood-carved frame. Without eye-contact the viewer may contemplate his introspection and what he is observing. The term Rückenfigur derives from the 19th century painter, Casper David Fredrich, who primarily painted figures from the back in the midst of a grand landscape. Ashan is not immersed in a landscape or a recognizable scene; his back is turned which invites the viewer to consider him in a state of isolation. Ashan has a thick, dark charcoal line that follows the contour

of his torso creating a barrier between him and his surroundings. The charcoal line may point to his contemplation of what is outside of the picture plane.

CHAPTER 6

BLUE AND OTHER COLORS

“Colors, therefore, should be understood as subjective cultural creations: you could no more meaningfully secure a precise universal definition for all the known shades than you could plot the coordinates of a dream” (Clair, 2016).

The varying colors in the work, even the common use of blue changes in each piece from one person to the next. Many artists have used the color blue in their work for different meanings successfully optimizing the evidence of the subjectivity related to color. Blue is the most repeated color within in my work, and like the artists, Picasso, Yves Klein and William Kentridge who all use blue in their work for different concepts, I use blue as a mode of representing the atmospheric presence of technology.

The use of blue in the shapes that surround the figure in *Surrounded in My Own Blue* is another self-portrait of my own contemplative reflections while using my smart phone. My thoughts while on my phone bounce in different directions and take me out of where I physically am and puts me in a consciousness somewhere else. This psychological instability while staring at a blue-lit screen, gives me the sense I am floating and within an unsteady place. A few of the portrait figures in my work like, *Blue and Buzzing Introspection*, and *A Cloudy Recollection* have blue starting in their fingertips moving up their hands. Like how blue-light has a physical reaction on our eyes and circadian rhythm, I use blue on the fingertips to give a visual representation of the longing felt to reach for their phone in a contemplative moment (Clair, 2016).

The other colors that make up the atmospheric abstraction, like green and red in *Sara Contemplating*, or pink and green in *In Conversation with Nini*, were the results of the instability of color within a certain medium. In both of these pieces I had put down a different color, came back the next day and the color had completely changed. The instability of the ink and my use of it as atmosphere mimics the inaccessibility of others thoughts and our reactions to them.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

I have always observed and contemplated my surroundings and in turn questioned how people observe, and what it means to observe people who are close to me. My observations meditate on these personal disconnections where a smart phone exists between me and another person. Humanity at its heart is relational. I would like the viewer to consider their dependence on technology within meaningful moments, shared with the people they care about most in life.

FIGURES

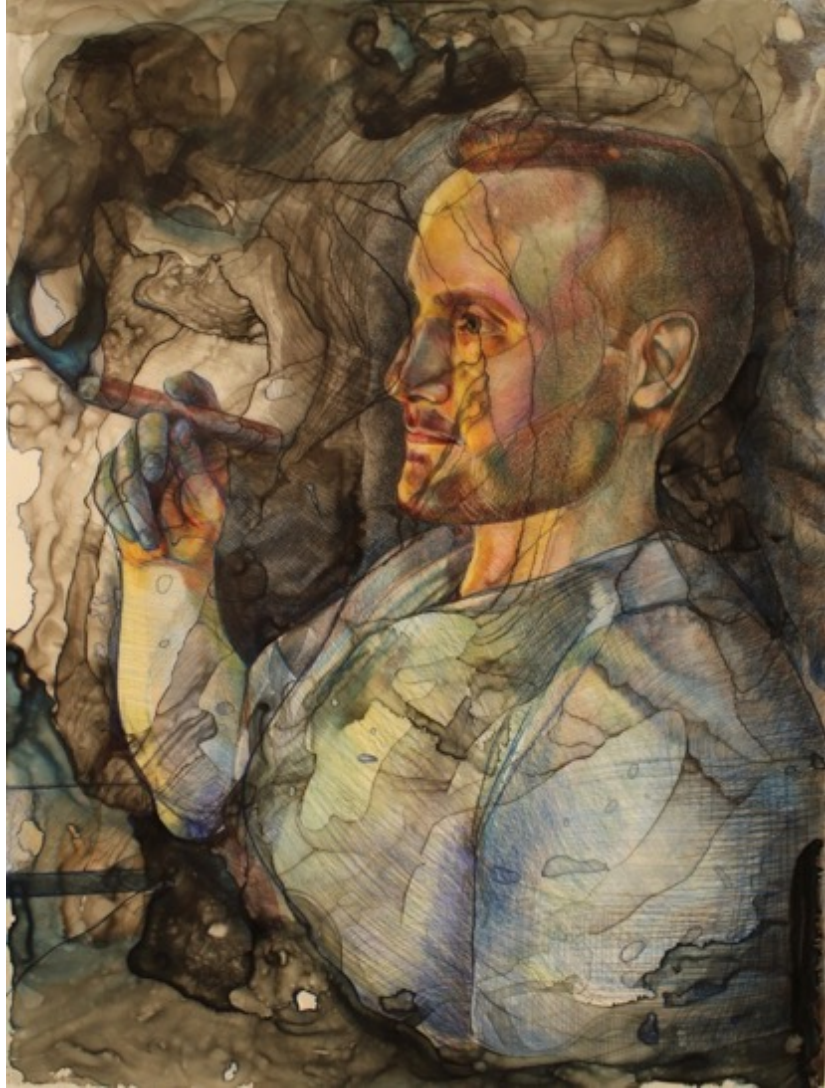


Figure 1: *Blue Smoke and Mirrors*
Prismacolor and ink on mylar, 18" x 24", 2019

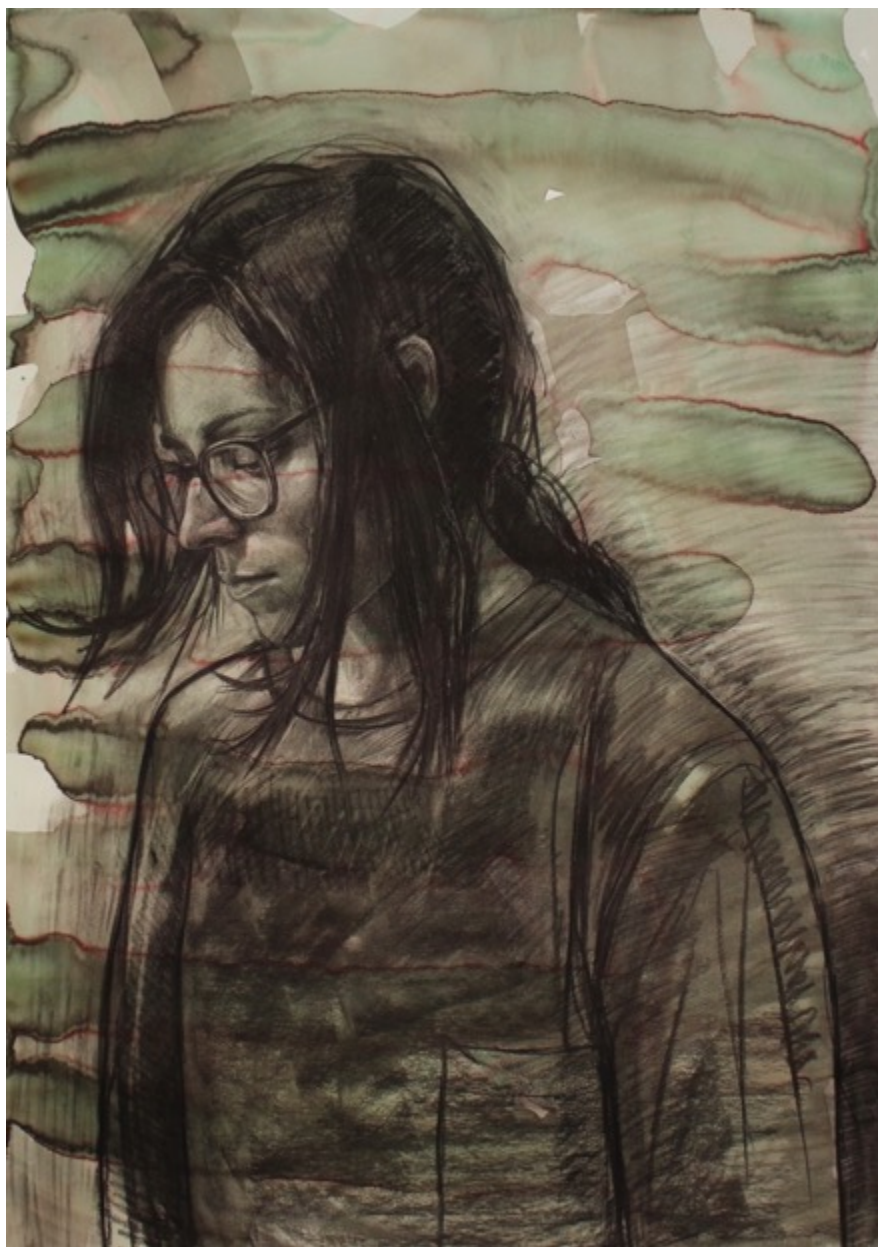


Figure 2: *Sara Contemplating*
Charcoal, ink, and watercolor on paper, 22" x 30", 2019



Figure 3: *Dad's Distraction*
Charcoal, wax pencil, ink, and watercolor on paper mounted to CNC cut board, 2019



Figure 4: *Away; A Deep Breath*
Charcoal and ink on paper, 2019



Figure 5: *Close, Far, Slow*
Charcoal and watercolor on paper, 22" x 30", 2019



Figure 6: *Blinded by the Light*
Charcoal, acrylic, wax pencil, and ink on paper mounted to board, 16" x 16", 2019



Figure 7: *A Cloudy Recollection*
Charcoal and ink on paper mounted to board, 16" x 16", 2019



Figure 8: *A Visual Guide on how to Hold and Interact with your Device*
Charcoal, wax pencil, and ink on paper mounted to board, 30" x 44", 2019

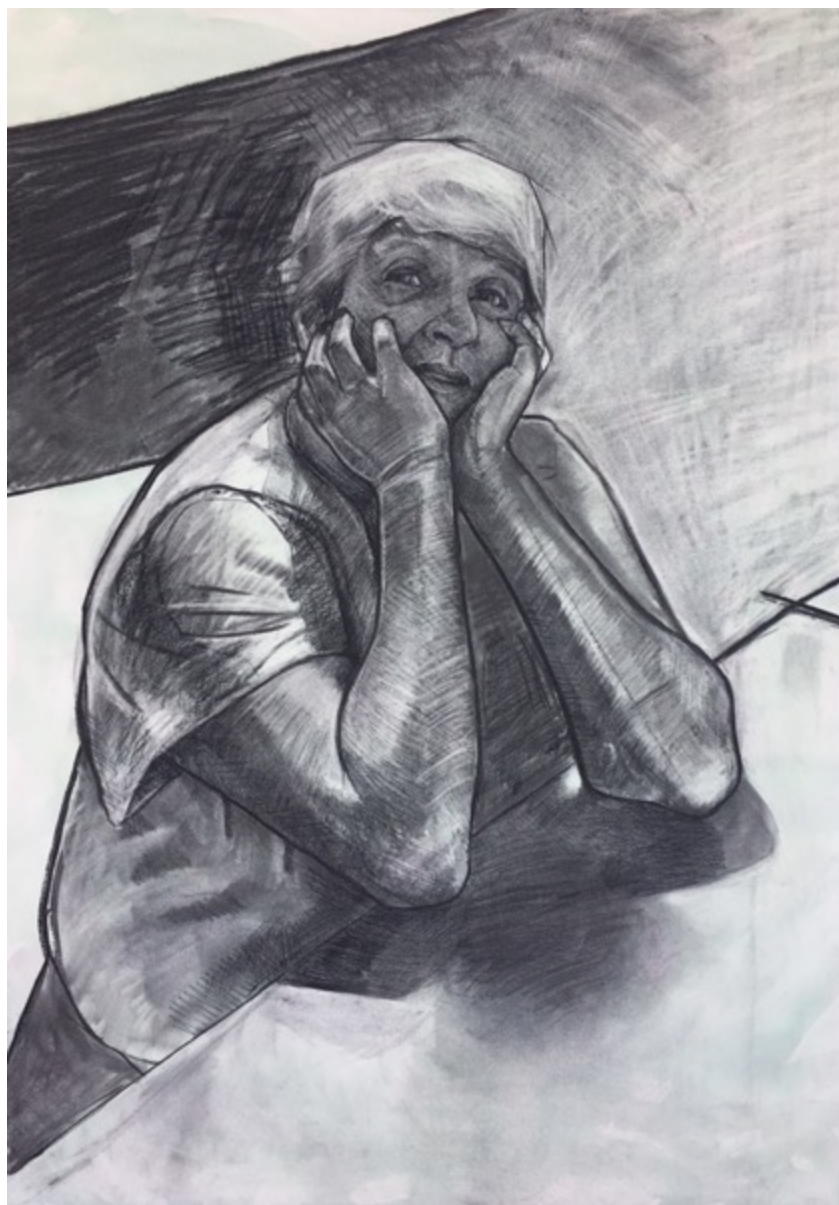


Figure 9: *In Conversation with Nini*
Charcoal and watercolor on paper, 22" x 30", 2019

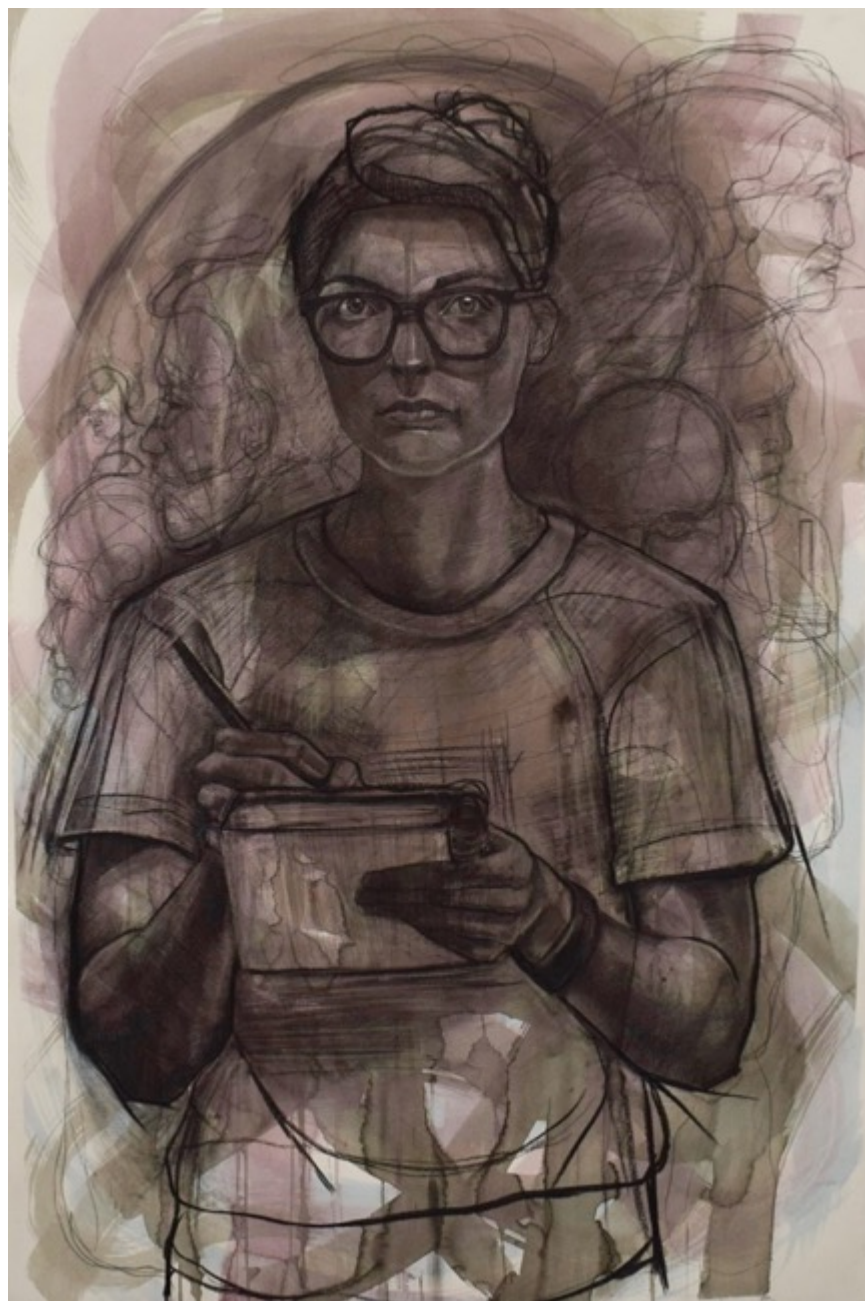


Figure 10: *Visitor Observing Viewer*
Charcoal and ink on paper, 24" x 35 ½", 2018



Figure 11: *Jessica, and Ellie*
Charcoal and ink on paper, 2019, 22" x 30"



Figure 12: *Ashan Contemplating*
Graphite, charcoal, and ink on paper mounted to board, 16" x 20", 2018



Figure 13: *Floating in my own Blue*
Charcoal, wax pencil, ink, and acrylic on paper mounted to CNC cut board, 2019



Figure 14: *Blue and Buzzing Introspection*
Charcoal, wax pencil, and ink on paper, 24" x 25", 2019

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